Cast Away and the Contradictions of Product Placement

Ted Friedman

SUMMARY. This essay looks at implications of product placement in Cast Away, the 2000 film in which Tom Hanks plays a Federal Express executive who is stranded on a desert island before making his way back home. It argues that Cast Away is a particularly valuable case study because of the conflict between its relentless product placement and its dark vision of contemporary global capitalism. The article investigates four aspects of global capitalism addressed by Cast Away: the compression of time, the compression of space, the rising influence of multinational corporations, and the dominance of consumer culture.

KEYWORDS. Capitalism, Cast Away, Federal Express, globalism, motion pictures, movies, product placement, time, space

Ted Friedman (PhD, Duke University) is Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, Georgia State University, University Plaza, Atlanta, GA 30303 (E-mail: tedf@gsu.edu).

[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]
INTRODUCTION:
THE NEED FOR THE CLOSE ANALYSIS
OF PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN FILM

Most critical writing about product placement has taken a broad scope, surveying the history, economics, and ethics of the practice as a whole. This is understandable—given such a pervasive phenomenon, it’s crucial to understand its full shape and context. But in addition to the broad view, it’s equally important to get a close-up—to zoom from the forest to the trees, and understand in greater detail how product placement functions in individual films. How does product placement affect the narrative and texture of a film? What friction and tensions occur when real-world brands are inserted into fictional texts? How do films negotiate the competing demands of corporate sponsors and creative personnel? These are questions that can only be answered by looking in detail at how product placement works in specific films.

For this study, I have chosen to look at *Cast Away*, the 2000 film in which Tom Hanks plays a Federal Express executive who spends four years shipwrecked on a desert island before escaping back to civilization. *Cast Away* is a particularly fascinating case study because of the conflict between its relentless product placement and its dark vision of contemporary global capitalism. On the one hand, the prominence of FedEx in the film is striking: not only is the company the hero’s employer, but the arrival of washed-ashore FedEx packages are major plot points in the movie. On the other hand, the film in many ways is a fantasy of escape from the “just in time” way of life FedEx represents. Getting shipwrecked frees Hanks’ character, Chuck Noland, from the speeded-up pace of contemporary global capitalism and teaches him to live at a different pace. The film’s conclusion highlights the rift between Chuck’s newfound calm and the banal frenzy of contemporary American life, then struggles to offer some sort of resolution.

At first glance, the intersection of such blatant product placement with this critical perspective towards corporate culture suggests hypocrisy, a failure of nerve (and crass bottom-line decision making) on the part of the filmmakers. However, I’d like to suggest that in some ways the conflict makes the film a more richly ambivalent text. The prominence of FedEx makes the film’s ultimate critique cut deeper—perhaps more deeply than the filmmakers (and FedEx) realized.
BEYOND PRODUCT PLACEMENT:
FedEx AS A CHARACTER

*Cast Away* was both a critically lauded and a commercially successful film. The Rotten Tomatoes film review database reports that 86% of national film critics gave it a favorable rating. Produced for a reported $90 million, it grossed $234 million in the US and another $175 million internationally (www.worldwideboxoffice.com). But amid the positive reviews, many critics did single the film out for what seemed like egregious FedEx product placement (Abramovich, 2000; Thomson, 2001; Schacher, 2000). As one reviewer wrote, “*Cast Away* is one big commercial for Federal Express; a connoisseur of product placement in films, I have never seen more egregious campaigning for one company in a film than I witnessed in this one” (Voigt, 2001).

The *Cast Away* producers’ arrangement with FedEx, however, was not exactly the traditional form of product placement (the exchange of sponsors’ money for product screen time). Director Robert Zemeckis, in fact, insists that it’s not product placement at all. On the commentary track to the film’s DVD, Zemeckis (2000) elaborates:

There was absolutely no product placement. We weren’t paid by anybody to place products in the movie. I did that in the past, and it wasn’t worth the little bit of money that they give you, because then you end up with another creative partner, which you don’t need. However, it just seemed to me that the whole integrity of the movie would be compromised if this was some phony trans-global letter delivery service, with some Hollywood fake logo and all that. It wouldn’t seem like it would be real. So very simply, we asked Federal Express for their permission to use their logo, and they could’ve said no. And that was it.

Zemeckis, however, is not telling the whole story here. While no placement fee was paid, FedEx supplied extensive resources to the filmmakers, including airplanes, trucks, packages and uniforms (Barton, 2000). In addition, FedEx CEO Fred Smith was an investor in the film’s production company (Abramovich, 2000).

The incorporation of FedEx into the story line of *Cast Away* appealed to the corporation precisely because it went beyond traditional product placement. Gail Christensen, FedEx’s Managing Director of Global Brand Management, spent two years working with the producers of *Cast Away*. She told the *Sacramento Bee*, “As we stepped back and looked at
it, we thought, ‘It’s not product placement, we’re a character in this movie.’ It’s not just a FedEx product on the screen. It transcends product placement’ (quoted in Barton, 2000).

This strategy is part of a trend of corporations attempting to move beyond advertising and other familiar marketing strategies to more firmly embed their brands into the culture. As journalist Naomi Klein writes in her scathing critique, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*:

For these companies, branding was not just a matter of adding value to a product. It was about thirstily soaking up cultural ideas and iconography that their brands could reflect by projecting these ideas and images back on the culture as “extensions” of their brands. Culture, in other words, would add value to their brands. (Klein, 1999, p. 29)

The opening shots of *Cast Away* establish FedEx as a kind of character. For the movie’s first few minutes, the camera follows the path of one package, from its pickup at an artists’ studio in rural Texas, to its delivery in Moscow. At times, the camera even takes a package’s-eye view of the action, imbuing the inanimate object with the kind of perspective normally reserved for the protagonists of a film. What’s particularly striking about this scene is how it distinctly echoes a FedEx ad campaign of a few years ago: the “Golden Package” series, in which each commercial followed the trail of one package from pickup to destination, as narrator Linda Hunt described the process as if it were a modern-day fairy tale. The opening moments of *Cast Away* play eerily like *Golden Package: The Movie*.

**CAST AWAY’S AMBIVALENT CRITIQUE OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM**

But if *Cast Away* starts like a big-screen commercial for FedEx, it soon evinces a much more ambivalent attitude toward the company and what it represents.

The movie is divided into three parts: the opening section establishing Chuck’s life as a FedEx manager, the middle section chronicling his time on the island, and the concluding section back in the USA. The structure of the film, then, is a kind of double escape.

First, we see the pressures and frustrations of Chuck’s “normal” life, after which crashing on a desert island seems like a blessed respite. The
film, of course, presents the crash itself as a harrowing disaster, and life on the island as a grueling challenge. Nonetheless, it’s also a thrilling adventure, a compelling fantasy of life outside the bounds of “civilization,” in which a pudgy middle manager is transformed into a lean hunter and master outdoorsman. As Tom Hanks put it in an interview with Charlie Rose included on the *Cast Away* DVD, “The best thing that ever happened to this guy was his plane blowing up and getting stuck on an island for a very long time.”

But the film also acknowledges the limitations of a life without companionship, without some form of social organization. And so Chuck escapes again—ending up back where he started, but with a new perspective. The final section of the film chronicles the culture shock between Chuck’s old world and his new outlook, as he—and we—grop to find some common ground.

In the following sections, I want to look at four aspects of contemporary life under global capitalism addressed by *Cast Away*’s dialectic of double escape: the compression of time, the compression of space, the increasing power of multinational corporations, and the dominance of consumer culture. Please note that while I use the phrase “contemporary global capitalism,” one could also refer, following David Harvey (1990), to “the condition of postmodernity,” or, to use Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s (2001) formulation, “Empire.”

**Compression of Time**

First, let’s look at how *Cast Away* addresses the compression of time under global capitalism. The sense that the pace of the world is continually speeding up has been brought about by new technologies of instantaneous communication, flexible production, and global transportation networks. FedEx, of course, is the perfect emblem of this phenomenon, delivering packages overnight around the world. The company, in fact, has been a prime mover in the quickening of the global economy, introducing to the business world the notion that any package could be “absolutely, positively” shipped anywhere overnight. The human toll of this speed-up, in the US, at least, has been to put more and more pressure on employees to keep up, resulting in a rise in average work hours, increased job stress, and the erosion of leisure time—the phenomena described by sociologist Juliet Schor (1992) in *The Overworked American.*

Chuck Noland in the first section of *Cast Away* is both victim of this speed up, and an enforcer of it upon others. We first meet him as that package we’ve been following arrives in Russia. Overweight, bleary,
and bullying. Chuck is making a speech to the workers at a new FedEx outpost in Moscow:

Time rules over us without mercy, not caring if we’re healthy or ill, hungry or drunk, Russian, American, beings from Mars. It’s like a fire. It could either destroy us or keep us warm. That’s why every FedEx office has a clock. Because we live or die by the clock. We never turn our back on it. And we never, ever allow ourselves the sin of losing track of time. Locally, it’s 1:56. That means we’ve got three hours and four minutes before the end of the day’s package sort. That’s how long we have. That’s how much time we have before this pulsating, accursed, relentless taskmaster tries to put us out of business!

Back home in Memphis, Chuck remains preoccupied and rushed. Paged in the middle of a big family Christmas dinner, he’s forced to rush off to catch a plane to Malaysia. In a comic moment before he departs, he and his girlfriend Kelly Frears (Helen Hunt) pull out their calendars and try to fit more time together into their hectic schedules. They end up hurriedly exchanging presents in the airport parking lot. At the last moment, Chuck pulls out one last gift—a box that clearly holds an engagement ring. He leaves it with Kelly, and asks her to wait to open it—it appears he’d planned to propose before being interrupted by that fateful page.

Once on the island, time operates in a completely different way. All the pressures of deadlines of the FedEx world no longer matter. Instead, Chuck’s life is ruled by the inexorable cycles of nature: the rising and setting of the sun, the ebb and flow of the tide, the changing of the seasons. Chuck has to make an effort to keep track of linear time at all, marking the days on a cave wall in the time-honored shipwreck-movie tradition.

In place of the relentless rush of his life in the USA, Chuck on the island is faced with a different challenge: monotony. Chuck finally escapes back to our world, but a changed man. The film elegantly dramatizes the conflict between our hurried world and Chuck’s new sense of time in a series of deliberately paced scenes in which Chuck is awkwardly welcomed back by his FedEx colleagues.

As the world rushes around him, Chuck appears to be moving in slow motion. In one shot, Chuck stands inside an empty office, while the FedEx welcome-home party continues outside the windows—complete with crowds, balloons, and even a brief glimpse (on a TV monitor) of FedEx
CEO Fred Smith. Village Voice critic J. Hoberman (2000) describes the scenes as “the least compromising, bleakest vision of the human condition in any Hollywood A-picture since Douglas Sirk’s Imitation of Life.” Hoberman goes on to take Zemeckis to task for the film’s resolution, which, after conjuring up such a profound sense of alienation, “casts it away with pumped-up affirmation.”

**Compression of Space**

The counterpart to global capitalism’s compression of time is its compression of space. By reducing the time it takes for information, products and people to move from point A to point B, communications and transportation technologies effectively make the world a smaller place. FedEx is again both exemplar and prime mover here. The company operates in over 200 countries, enabling regions that would once have taken weeks to reach to receive product shipments from around the world overnight.

There are certainly potentially positive consequences to this transition, as the world is brought together into what McLuhan called a “global village.” Much of how globalism has proceeded in practice, however, has led to worsening inequality and cultural domination (see, for starters, Hardt and Negri, 2000; Klein, 1999; Harvey, 1990). Cast Away does not deal with the worst of these excesses directly—it follows the travails of a white male American middle manager, someone of relatively great privilege in the global economy. And at moments, it seems to offer smug cheerleading for America’s increased influence in the post-Cold War economy. As the camera follows that first package through the streets of Moscow, it happens to pan across a group of Russians in the process of taking down a bronze monument to Lenin. (The scene is set in the early 1990s.) It’s a self-congratulatory moment, suggesting that FedEx has replaced the heroes of Communism in the hearts of Muscovites.

But the scene in Russia also demonstrates the ominous potential of globalization to level cultural differences, turning the world into a homogenous, US-dominated consumer culture. Chuck, in his speech to his Russian workers, is quite clearly the arrogant cultural imperialist, imposing his vision of time and efficiency on the natives—who in turn resist. As Chuck finishes his big speech about time, he realizes his translator has been taking some liberties. When Chuck asks what he’s been saying, the translator replies, “I tell them what they want to hear. I
say that this man, when his truck broke down, he stole a boy’s bicycle to
do his deliveries.” Chuck in response can only protest, “I borrowed it!”

Globalism can be rough on white male American middle managers,
too. Running a far-flung corporation means sending employees around
the world at the drop of a hat, as the Willy Loman’s of a previous gener-
ation become globe-trotting “road warriors.” It’s just such a trip which
leads to the crash.

After the crash, Chuck’s universe contracts to the size of one small is-
land. He’s escaped globalism by ending up on the one spot FedEx can’t
reach . . . except that, in the creepiest irony in the film, FedEx can reach
the island—or its packages and logo can, at least, as the contents of the
wrecked aircraft wash on shore. Even at the edge of civilization, appar-
ently, you can’t completely escape FedEx and its logo. As Hanks tells
Charlie Rose on the DVD, “there will always be a FedEx . . . You can’t
imagine a world without FedEx.” Hanks’ quote recalls an observation
of media scholar Susan Douglas (reported in Soar and Ericsson, 2000)
about the use of product placement in films set in the past and future: by
placing Perrier in the 1950s, or Taco Bell in the mid-21st Century, mar-
keters colonize time, positing a universe in which their product is be-
yond history—it always has existed, and it always will. FedEx’s
placement in the middle of a deserted South Pacific island colonizes
space in a similar way, suggesting that no corner of the globe could pos-
sibly be free from its influence. Given that FedEx didn’t even pay out-
right for the privilege, the filmmakers’ insistence on placing the logo so
prominently on the desert island suggests something even more insid-
ious than product placement: that the filmmakers’ very imaginations have
been colonized by the logic of global capitalism, so that it’s impossible
to think of a world without FedEx. To the film’s credit, it doesn’t seem
so sure that’s a good thing.

Role of Multinational Corporations

Next, let’s look at how Cast Away addresses another central aspect of
contemporary life: the increasing influence of multinational corporations.
Critics of global capitalism observe today that multinational corpora-
tions have grown more powerful than nation-states. (See Hardt and
Negri, 2000; Harvey, 1990.) FedEx is one of those corporations, with
revenues in 2000 of $18.3 billion. At the start of Cast Away, Chuck is a
company man—he’s allowed FedEx to dominate his life. His loyalty to
FedEx rises above that shown to his family or girlfriend, as we’ve seen.
On the island, Chuck maintains a perverse level of corporate loyalty—especially for somebody whose corporate flight just crashed. (More than one critic has wondered why, when Chuck gets back home, he doesn’t sue the hell out of FedEx.) When packages from the downed plane start to wash up, Chuck first refuses to open them, telling himself he’ll deliver them once he gets home. By contrast, when the corpse of one of the other passengers on the crashed plane washes ashore, Chuck helps himself to the shoes and clothes without a second thought. Finally, though, necessity takes precedence over loyalty, and he opens the boxes—all except one, upon which he notices a drawing of a pair of wings. He leaves that one untouched, to deliver on his return.

Once back in our world, Chuck finds he can’t rekindle his loyalty to FedEx. As we have seen, he remains alienated and apart amidst the corporate celebrations of his rescue. He does, however, deliver that final package—as I’ll discuss below.

**Consumer Culture**

Before we get to the final package, though, let’s look at one last aspect of global capitalism addressed by *Cast Away*: the dominance of consumer culture.

FedEx itself is not exactly a product, but rather a *service* which facilitates the distribution of products. FedEx is also a critical cog in machine of consumer culture—the intermediary which ships products to stores, documents to managers, and catalog and Internet orders to customers. This mediating role makes branding FedEx particularly challenging, and helps explain why the company plasters its logos so relentlessly on boxes, trucks and planes—with no tangible product to sell, the logo must stand in for the product. This also explains why the company changed its name in 1994 from Federal Express to the shorter, more logo-friendly FedEx. As Bruce McGovert, implementation director for Landor Associates, the branding consultants who orchestrated the shift, told a trade publication, “Whereas Federal Express only permitted 58-inch letters on the side of a trailer, the letters spelling FedEx can stand six feet tall. Airplanes can be read across an entire airfield” (Corporate Design Foundation, 1995).

Consumer culture is the flip-side of the global capitalist system of production. The payoff for being an “overworked American” is supposed to be the chance to buy all those shiny consumer goods. One contradiction is immediately apparent, however: how are we supposed to enjoy those goods if we spend all our time and energy on work? This is Chuck
Noland’s situation at the beginning of the film: so preoccupied with work that he hardly notices his material surroundings. Beyond this irony, however, the film doesn’t push much of a critique of consumer culture in the early going, being more concerned with the work side of the equation.

The film gets much more interested in material culture once we reach the island. Here, as the packages wash ashore, Chuck begins to repurpose ordinary consumer goods into tools for survival. The blades on a pair of ice skates become knives. The netting from a dress crinoline becomes a sturdy fishnet. In a neat self-referential bit, reels of videotape, seemingly useless without a TV, VCR, and electricity, take on new function as the rope tying together Chuck’s escape raft. And most famously, Chuck repurposes a volleyball to fulfill his need for companionship, fashioning a crude face on the sphere out of his own blood. Inspired by the manufacturer’s name printed on the ball, Chuck dubs his new friend, “Wilson.”

Many critics and viewers have spotlighted these feats of ingenuity as the high points of *Cast Away*. What makes this part of the movie so fun to watch is the way it defamiliarizes everyday consumer objects. In our own lives, consumer goods are *fetishized* objects—goods we purchase not just because they’re useful, but because of the package of associations, values, and fantasies attached to them by advertising and marketing in our culture. The desert island strips away the layers of fetishization. All the shiny packaging and snappy commercials are incredibly beside the point when you’re trapped on a desert island with no TV, no electricity, searching for the tools of survival. Price—the ultimate fetish, which converts use value into exchange value—is completely beside the point, as well. Stripped of their status as fetishized commodities, these objects are boiled down to their most basic use-value. *Cast Away*, then, provides a fantasy of escape from the blaring, obfuscating world of the commodity fetish, to a simpler world where we value objects simply for what we can do with them.

The irony—the fundamental, structuring irony of *Cast Away*—is that product placement is a quintessential form of commodity fetishization. Here, I think the film manages to negotiate this irony because FedEx, as I’ve already discussed, is more a *service* than a *product*. FedEx isn’t defamiliarized and repurposed the way the ice skates and videotape are, since it was part of their delivery mechanism rather than their commercial packaging. In a way, FedEx, even on the island, continues to do exactly what it’s supposed to do—deliver packages, albeit not to their intended recipient.
The one other prominent product placement on the island is the Wilson volleyball. Wilson Sporting Goods Co. didn’t pay for the placement, but did provide the filmmakers with more than 60 volleyballs. Asked whether the film might cast his product in a negative light, Allen Davenport, business manager of volleyballs at Wilson, told the reporter, “I’m not sure how you portray a volleyball badly” (Silk, 2001).

**RECONCILING CONTRADICTION**

So, how can we make sense of the contradictions of *Cast Away*? How does the film ultimately reconcile the clash between its corporate backers and its cultural politics—or does it?

One interpretive strategy we could use to explain the resolution of this contradiction is to describe the result as “inoculation” (Barthes, 1957/1973). The marketer takes a small dose of self-criticism up front, and in return receives immunity from more damaging criticism. This analysis seems a useful way to describe the self-parodying product placement in films such as *Wayne’s World 2* (for Reebok, Pizza Hut, and Pepsi) and *Demolition Man* (for Taco Bell). The advertiser winks at the audience, to let the viewers know it’s in on the joke—then gets in its pitch all the same. But I think there’s something deeper going on in *Cast Away*. The film doesn’t just tweak FedEx—it demonstrates fundamental misgivings about everything FedEx stands for.

Alternately, we could describe the film as subversive—a subtle attack on FedEx and all it stands for. But this perspective fails us as well, I’d argue—would FedEx have gone along, if it suffered such clear damage? Would critics have attacked the film as a blatant commercial for FedEx, had the film been widely perceived as self-defeating?

I’d like to suggest a third option: that we see the contradictions in *Cast Away* as dialectical. Robert Ray (1985) in his landmark critical history of American film, *A Certain Tendency in the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, draws together Marxist and structuralist forms of film analysis to argue that Hollywood’s most popular films succeed by offering their audiences imaginary resolutions to ongoing social conflicts. The quintessential version of this mythic reconciliation is the marriage plot, transcending class and gender divisions through the conventions of romance.

This is what the conclusion of *Cast Away* attempts to accomplish, as it struggles to reconcile its warring perspectives in a utopian synthesis. As we’ve already seen, after Chuck returns, we are first made aware of
the yawning chasm between his new island-forged perspective, and that of his old friends and colleagues. His job no longer makes sense to him, and his girlfriend has married another man. But then the film tries to find a resolution—tries to reach the “happy ending” audiences expect out of a Hollywood movie, and tries to imagine a way to live in this world by a different set of rules. In the final scene, Chuck delivers the one package he never opened on the island, the one with the wings on the box. In a neat bit of narrative bookending, it belongs to the artist who we briefly met at the film’s opening, shipping off the package that ended up in Moscow. She specializes in giant sculptures of wings. We see Chuck and the woman briefly flirt, with hints of a possible relationship to follow. The film ends on a shot of a rural crossroads, suggesting Chuck is free to choose his own path from here.

**CONCLUSIONS**

At film’s end, then, *Cast Away* offers up the prospect of a new life for Chuck, one which will allow him to integrate his island-forged perspective with life in the USA. In place of our rushed experience of time, Chuck exhibits a Zen-like state of calm. In place of our crowded world of global commerce, we are left with the image of a blank rural crossroads. In place of consumer culture, we see the individualized craft of the artist. And even, in place of the FedEx logo, the artist’s more personal visual signature, a stylized pair of wings.

Chuck does hold on to some sense of corporate loyalty at film’s end, but it’s a personally chosen, limited form of loyalty—he does deliver that final package. FedEx, then, still seems to have a place in the world after all the changes Chuck has gone through. But in an unhurried world where we could all live like Chuck, why would anyone bother to use it?

**REFERENCES**


